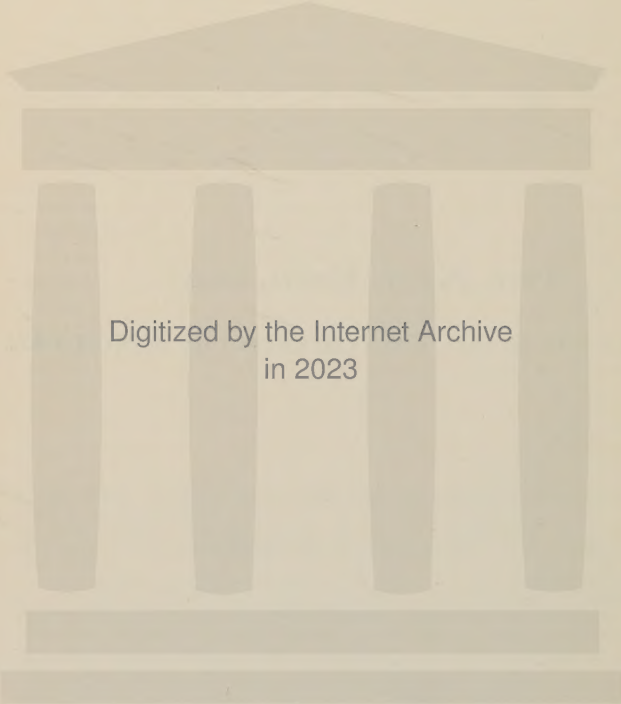


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CLASS EXERCISES IN CONSTRUCTION

If we have watched of late years the slow clearing to a focus of compositional methods, we have noticed a gradual but distinct shift of emphasis. Or it might be more honest to admit plainly that only within recent years are we beginning to have definite methods at all, since ways and means for instruction in language facility used to be among the considerable class of excellences which we "so much do vaunt but nowhere show." Not many years ago we used in school to pore for disappointed hours over a vague collection of platitudes called the "Theory of Rhetoric." By and by began to appear the heavy type of text-book somewhat paradoxically named "A Practical Rhetoric." Still common to-day is the compromise, "Theory and Practice of Rhetoric." But the best sign for our future seems the growing frequency of that unpretentious manual which consents to be called plainly "Handbook of Composition," or better, "Constructive Exercises in English."

For we have learned better than we yet show that effectual teaching of composition must be no matter of theory, or of accident, or of faith, but an exact science. Of course the ancient puzzle is still ours. "What could I have done to my vineyard that I have not done? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?" But at least the day is past when our vineyard was expected to prosper "under a salutary neglect." No longer can English teachers be consoled by Shakespeare's dictum that "to read and write comes by nature,"—that therefore they are not culpable if the gift never comes to the pupil at all. Such comfort would serve if Plato were literally right,—that education is the gradual recollection of what we used to know. But we are fully persuaded that at least the art to write does not come by nature at all,—that here is one path of learning which must be surveyed, paved, marked with sign-boards so clearly that fools shall not err therein. Left to the inspiration of native wit, the average boy will do one of three things:—he will shirk his composition—we all know the sprawling script with long spaces between the words; he will make a mountain of it—familiar, too, the toil-worn, crumpled sheet; or at best he will produce a theme, lively perhaps, but quite independent of rhetorical,

even of grammatical conventions. Demos at sixteen has very particular business, but he enters the high school, assured that business has nothing to do with phrase structure. He has not learned to find in the craft of language any trace of that zeal of conquest which can make laborious days delightful. All the theories from Aristotle down would never reveal to him such a possibility.

For the boy, intent upon whatsoever things can be seen and handled, the most uninviting sight in life is a display of generalities. No theory under the sun is quite worth attention; and "Theory of Composition!"—strange food, he thinks, to give a growing boy. Offence lurks in the very headings of his chapters—empty words ending in -y or -ence or -tion. If he might have his way, every abstract noun would be left in the dictionary where it doubtless belongs. And perhaps our pupil is sometimes justified. Sometimes the able and ingenious author of his text-book rather seems to have forgotten about the boy and girl, in his nearer recollection of the "philosophic mind" which the student of twenty supposes himself to possess. We find that in high school, as in college, pupils must be led like the rats in "The Piper," "by curiosity," but the object of the curiosity is different. The elder is eager to classify, to relate, to reason, and prefers to hover in thought on the verge of the "vast abrupt" or the "intense inane." The younger, practical, stolid, guarded always against the suspicion of "non-sense," will explore the inner workings of an automobile, but will not be tempted, if he knows it, to enter one step the abstract land "where those ideas be." "Bows and arrows and little wheel-barrows,—that's what little boys are made of." And the boy of the high school is essentially a little boy. He is for common sense,—never a moment for analysis.

If we ask him to admire the mere technique of composition, the best praise we shall win from him will be the words of poor Christopher Sly, "'Tis an excellent piece of work, Madam Lady. Would 'twere done." But if an excellent piece of work appears clearly possible for himself, his indifference vanishes. For it would be blind to lament that a boy loves above all to handle tools and fashion shapes. Here is our chance ready-made. Thanks to his joy in construction we may stir from his stubborn head the stiff prejudice not only that the form of words is beyond the pale of his consideration but that it is too difficult a matter for anybody under thirty. In the manual class he loves to make a table, not because it is a table, but because he is clever enough to make it. He may, then, if we give him as simple tools, and teach him their use with equal precision, take pride even in the construction of an English sentence,—like to make it well-

jointed, evenly proportioned. We are still learning how simple those tools must be and how perfectly their use must be understood.

A sure advance, however, is the renaissance in class drill, once confined to a tame analysis or perpetual correction. For the understanding of faults has never so far engendered a mighty passion for literary creation. It is well "to see and know," if thereby we can certainly "abstain." With or without a text-book we must drill the standing guard against the ubiquitous pronoun, the haphazard tense, the unfastened participle, the runaway or the broken-backed sentence. Perhaps, by-the-way, we do well to make our own corrective exercises, for we have nuisance enough in the local dialect. Each district of New England seeks out sufficiently its own inventions of colloquial idiom. But style was never learned by the most patient addiction to the popular collection of English barbarisms, the blunder anthology. Still our good boy is but dully minded to reform his sentence. Quite frankly he does not intend to be at much trouble, with chance of fair luck so slight as he sees it. He is as little likely, he thinks, to grope out good English, as was the old alchemist messing in his alembic to hit upon gold. Our boy is not even sure that he fancies gold. Anyway, he will not try to make a thing unless he knows how.

His mastery of words may come, we know, only from detailed class practice in actual sentence construction. By imitation of good models, written on subjects which solicit common-sense and romance, the basis of boyhood's wisdom, the pupil may gain a recognition of form and win a power of accurate phrasing more fully rounded than his own unassisted best. Even more productive, because more definite in its appeal to latent intelligence, is the building of shapely sentences, still upon congenial themes, under the direction of the teacher. Starting from the simple statement, the pupil may learn to insert adjectives, adverbs; then phrases, infinitive, adverbial, adjective, or past participial; and gradually to add, in increasing diversity, subordinate clauses and predicates in parallel structure that the sentence may grow steadily in length, in power, and ultimately perhaps in grace.

So the boy is left in a moderate, but not in an unchartered freedom. He has chosen his material, but shaped it in a design of clause and phrase prescribed by his teacher. His originality is stirred, for the stuff and handling of the sentence is his own; yet the form is kept within bounds, proportioned, free from needless change, from the juvenile prolixity and chance meanderings in the wonderful clause labyrinths discoverable only to the unguided. Nor is the boy ill-pleased with his handiwork. He has written a sentence in story-book

fashion, and he knows just how he wrote it; he understands each step of its sensible growth. No matter if his theme sentences continue for a while amorphous; in time, under the steady insistence of his class drill, they will be freed from redundancies, better knit in a friendly logic. Best of all he knows his work not done at random. He can do it again, "as well, nay, better perchance." You remember the story of the Knight Coward, who, at a crisis, always fled the foe. One day, forced by Sir Gawaine into battle, he overthrew his opponent, crying joyfully, "If I had known how easy it is to be brave, I should have been brave long ago." A like surprise is as possible and as wholesome for our pupil.

And if we are wise, we shall make his self-satisfaction a cover for the hated grammar review, usually so staled by familiarity that the boy presents a bland imperviousness at any suspicion of its approach. But he warms to a mild excitement at the manufacture of language to order. The process is humbling, too; it sets so uncomfortably in the light each hidden ignorance or unexpected vagueness. Guessing, alas, avails no more. Since, then, directions for the building of sentences are necessarily given in grammatical terms; we may with a shift of emphasis carry the exercise to the details of syntax relation. The adjective phrase may be followed by a subject, a predicate, an object in the form of a noun clause with an infinitive for subject. In short, we may make the task as minute and exact as we please, — teach our pupil by easy steps to build a sentence of whatsoever complexity may be necessary in preparation for the work in foreign languages. Thus at least is grammar found to exist for the sentence, not the sentence for grammar.

In the same fashion punctuation drill may be correlated with our language architecture. From the mass of conflicting rules still current, often haphazard for all their assurance, we may select the few most salient, shorten them to a form tangible for memory, above all word them to apply to definite grammatical structure. So at least they seem reliable and authentic, open no more to the shifts of chance, but so far at least as the Freshman knows, invariable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. Thus limited and defined, punctuation may be logically developed and enforced during the class exercises for phrase and clause order, till it too becomes no longer an accident, but an understood habit.

As rigor is easiest here, so, in all composition work, we find restriction of form does not mean repression of thought. Without the bonds the average boy would remain ingloriously mute. He comes to us stirred by dumb thoughts, blurting monstrosities hideous with mangled meaning. That his manifold utterances may have power, they must be related, sub-

ordinated one to another; they will never achieve that subordination till his sentences be denied the guileless ramble of their initial way. For this reason the early class drill may venture boldly to exclude the compound sentence, that the young writer may resort perforce to the types of closer directness — terse, logical, unified. Thus, with a passable sentence structure already familiar, the college Freshman, freed from the bewilderment of style enormities, may apply his imagination and ingenuity more comfortably to the matter of his theme.

With the background of habit well established, the mechanism of language well started, the high school student may enjoy more liberty in class experiment. He may work his will with sentence transformations, expanding or contracting in curious variety, reducing, perhaps, the good compound to the good complex, the complex to the simple, the clause to a phrase, the phrase to a word. Nor is the compound sentence now frowned upon. Rather is the pupil encouraged to discover the rhythmic charm of the loose form; to seek all natural diversities of the periodic and the balance, moulding and remoulding pliable material to find at last its most expressive shape. By sentence manipulation indeed can he best learn the true significance of those excellent terms — force and emphasis.

And the exposition paragraph, once an unattempted ideal, later a product of grim pressure, becomes by a gradual initiation a matter of course. The young writer would still prefer to be fancy-free, but if he tackles in the modern way at first the single paragraph and then the series, he finds easily the logic of its necessities, the limitation of view, the topic sentence, the conclusion an organic part, not affixed like a postage stamp, the light transition to begin each new paragraph. And here, too, we comfort him soonest if the models are on his own subjects — on Cedric, or Bottom, or Sydney Carton. Best of all does he like the work if his teacher writes with him in class, for then, happy in the fellowship of rivalry, he feels success to be easy and the effort desirable.

So personal a contact with the work of her pupil makes a searching demand upon the English teacher, but her back is already so patiently adjusted to the load that she has ceased to reckon on the last straw. Daily for hours she must labor on the correction of mechanical errors, yet allow no mechanical dulness to blunt the appeal of her personality. She must profess unbounded zeal in the publication of a school paper; must sustain *Juventus* through the fluctuations of a debating club, or inspire a commencement so well devised as to hit the taste of everybody in town. She must be careful not to encroach on the demands of the more formal departments,

and yet make known to the majority of her pupils all that they are like to know of the strength and pleasure and solace waiting on the library shelf. As a teller of tales she must rival Sheherazade. She must fill out and vivify the bald outlines of class reading by an unfailing wealth of subsidiary knowledge that the pupils may absorb culture unawares. Hers it is to perform the perpetual miracle, to make the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak, to give to the blind and color-blind some little sight of world's beauty. She does not mind a little extra responsibility.

And she has her reward in a small measure of visible result. No English teacher, to be sure, expects ever to find in her class-room the ideal place mentioned by Dante, "where what is willed can be done." But we have gained, and gained where we have seemed to lose. Without his knowledge the pupil has taken a considerable start, not only in the practice but in the theory of rhetoric. Aided by his teacher, he has begun to discover for himself the laws of composition, and knows them, since he made them, good, above the level of juvenile contempt. For those abstractions—unity, coherence, emphasis, and the like—he has found in his own experience the need, and thereupon needed the names, and the names have become significant. And so, partly comprehending his attempt, he has failed and knows, in mature parlance, the reason why. He has known, too, his own small measure of success, and entered ever so little the pleasure of intelligent workmanship.


ANNOUNCEMENT OF MARCH MEETING

The tenth annual spring meeting of the Association will be held at 9.30 A. M., on *Saturday, March 18th* (not on March 11th, as incorrectly announced in last month's leaflet), in Jacob Sleeper Hall, Boston University.


Subject: *Differentiation of the English Course in Secondary Schools:*

- I. *Why Differentiation is Undesirable.*
Mr. D. O. S. Lowell, Headmaster Roxbury Latin School.
- II. *The Necessity of Differentiation.*
Miss Josephine Hammond, Practical Arts High School, Boston.
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THE EDITOR.



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